

THE CHAPLAIN AS A TEST CASE

By

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THE CHAPLAIN AS A LISTENER

Two chaplains met on the street. The ensuing dialogue, almost in passing, went like this,

"How's it going?"

"Not so good. My wife was run over by a bus yesterday."

"Gee! And how are the kids?"

"Well, they're pretty shook up about it. Funeral's tomorrow."

"Outstanding! How are you getting along with your new C.C.?"

"As a matter of fact, he gave me a bad C.C. last week and I got my C.C. notice three days ago. So, you see, really....."

"Say, I've got to run. Gotta go see you. Glad to hear things are going well. Say hello to the wife and kids for me. So long."

Obviously somebody wasn't listening. He heard words and responded at each pause with appropriate niceties. However, they turned out to be neither appropriate nor nice. Although exaggerated, this type of exchange is fairly typical. People just don't listen. Chaplains are no exception.

If the chaplain is to be at all effective in his work with people, he must be a good listener. To the extent that he is deficient in this vital area his effectiveness is diminished. He must cultivate sound

listening habits and increase his ability to really listen. This is true for him in his role as counselor, preacher, administrator, supervisor, instructor and staff officer.

This brief study explores the significant elements of listening as an art and to some extent as a science. The approach is in terms of definitions and considerations; the importance of good listening; to the development of the capability to listen; the conditions to listening; and the elements of effective listening. A formula for effective listening is advanced and results are noted. It is by no means exhaustive, but should give, within the limits imposed, a general overview of the art of listening as it applies to the chaplain in his various roles.

1. A DEFINITION OF LISTENING

What is listening? Obviously, listening is more than an auditory process in which the ear picks up sound. It is quite possible to pick up sound and yet never listen. According to Dr. Ralph Nichols, perhaps today's foremost authority on listening, Americans are poor listeners.¹ The problem is that we don't know how to listen, and what's more, we remember only about one half of what's said even when we try. Attention of unaided material drops rapidly to one fourth when we don't actively seek it (Holtz).²

¹ Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens, Are You Listening?, New York, The Green-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1957, p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 5.

We might say then, that listening is the act or process of auditing sound or conversation, "making a conscious mental effort to hear."³ It involves paying attention to all forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

II. DISTINCTIONS IN LISTENING

Listening is distinct from hearing. Hearing is defined as "the act of perceiving sounds."⁴ Of course, listening and hearing are often used interchangeably in contemporary conversation, but for the purposes of this study hearing is viewed as the auditory process and listening as the same process augmented by concurrent mental concentration.

A second important distinction in listening is observing non-verbal communication. This involves both receiving and giving "signals" on the part of the listener. Good listening must have a quality of its own.⁵ This quality is what distinguishes a listener from a brick wall and makes two-way communication possible. Body movements are involved in this two-way communication and are usually picked up by the alert listener. He also uses body movements in his own giving of signals. An understanding of what takes place in non-verbal communication, though often intuitive, is enhanced by the study of kinesics, the science of body movement.⁶

³ Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Edited by David B. Guralnik, Cleveland, The World Publishing Company, 1960, p. 437.

⁴ Ibid., p. 345.

⁵ Nichols, Op cit., p. 36.

⁶ Ray L. Birdwhistell, Kinesics and Context, Philadelpia, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970.

A third distinction in listening is that it must involve acute concentration, not only upon words, but upon inflection, tone, volume, pitch, movements of eyes, face, hands, feet and body. It involves total concentration upon the speaker as well as what he is saying and how he says it.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING FOR THE CHAPLAIN

Dr. Nichols has said that listening has a quality which enables the good listener to control talking.⁷ If this is true, then the chaplain, who is usually involved (in his pastoral role) in helping a person make an adjustment or effect a change, should really learn to listen. In fact if he is going to be effective, he will learn through his listening to manage the situation and channel thought and action in a healthy direction.

Listening evokes response. The empathetic listener can draw out a recalcitrant personality. As a counselor the chaplain seeks to create a climate of trust and empathy in which the counselor can function. Good listening is essential to the establishment of this climate.

The chaplain needs to understand people and their problems. As he learns to listen effectively he will better be able to grasp how they actually feel and what they are really saying. He'll be able to understand.

Chaplains trained to preach, teach, proclaim and lead often find it hard to listen. They are in the habit of talking. Consequently they must discipline themselves to learn to listen or their effectiveness will be impaired. They must strive toward what William Thompson calls "creative listening."

⁷ Nichols, Op cit., p. 33.

IV. ELEMENTS IN EFFECTIVE OR CREATIVE LISTENING

Effective or creative listening consists of receiving and dispatching verbal and non verbal signals clearly and efficiently.⁸ The verbal signals are the words themselves, as well as the inflection, tone, volume, pitch and distance of the voice alluded to earlier. Not only must the ear hear these signals, but the mind must interpret their meaning.

The non-verbal signals are movements of the eyes, face, upper and lower torso, hands and feet. These must also be received and interpreted.⁹ But, in addition to receiving these signals, the creative listener must also give some signals of his own. His listening must have quality to be effective. He can remain silent and communicate either warmth or coldness. He can use bodily movement to communicate the degree of reception. If he remains totally passive, he may well be listening, but the speaker will have no evidence of it. To be effective as a listener he must let the speaker know he is listening. To accomplish this he must indeed be very creative and put to use all of the tools at his disposal.

⁸ William D. Thompson, A Listener's Guide to Preaching, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1966, p. 77.

⁹ A detailed study of the science of kinesics and kinectics is beyond the scope of this paper, but is extensively explored in J. L. Birchenhead's book, Kinesics and Context, cited above. The interpretation of body movement and non-verbal communication is a skill the chaplain should be interested in developing for it enhances the perspective and context of his listening. The more effectively he can "read" the person to whom he is listening, the more effective he is in helping that person. A. L. Wisenberg and R. L. Smith, Jr. have collaborated on a book entitled Nonverbal Communication, cited in the selected bibliography. This work, a survey on the subject goes into some detail on the mechanics of non-verbal communication, and is helpful in learning to interpret a speaker's non-verbal signals.

V. THE CAPABILITY TO LISTEN

Listening is a skill which must be acquired. Hearing is a natural ability. Listening skill is not related to intelligence, hearing acuity or reading ability.¹⁰ Listening requires different skills than reading.¹¹ The average individual with normal hearing can listen to approximately 400-700 words per minute, far in excess of the normal speaking capability of 100-200 words per minute.¹² This means that the mind has the ability to handle almost four times as much information as a speaker can deliver in a given period of time.

So, the big problem in listening is not picking up words, but rather keeping the mind occupied properly in between the words. The problem is one of concentration. Critical and careful listening requires it.

The capability to listen is developed in direct proportion to the ability to discipline, channel and direct the mind to stay on the subject during the "spare time." Dr. Nichols lists four mental process for using this "spare time" when listening.

1. Think ahead
2. Weigh what you hear
3. Review what you have heard
4. Listen between the lines¹³

¹⁰ Nichols, Op cit., p. 13.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹² Thompson, Op cit., p. 79.

¹³ Nichols, Op cit., p. 62.

VI. OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

The major obstacle to listening is of course talking. It is very difficult, (though not impossible) to listen while talking. So the first obstacle to be overcome must of necessity be too much talking. The listener must not only stop talking, he must plan not to talk, because otherwise instead of listening, he will be planning what he is going to say when he does start talking.

This is particularly observable in group situations where many members have aggressive personalities. Very little listening takes place. When one member is speaking the others are rarely concentrating on what is being said, but are rather formulating what they are going to say when they get the chance.

If the listener has overcome this initial obstacle he still faces an almost Herculean task, for he is now fighting a battle against time. The spoken word, as distinct from the written word, must be received and understood at the moment of delivery or very shortly thereafter. Except for those blessed with total recall, there is no going back unless the speaker can be asked to repeat what he has said.

In addition to these obstacles there is the physical problem, i.e., the environment with its acoustical distractions. These external stimuli act against the mind's attempt to stay with the speaker and concentrate on what he is saying.

The internal problem is no easier. Sometimes the speaker will elicit an emotional response and the mind gallops off on a trip of over-stimulation or tangent-following. Emotional filters and stereotypes also act as deterrents to effective listening. Strong disciplinary effort is

required to overcome these obstacles.

Finally, all these things begin to "gang up" on the listener and the cumulative effect is that he progressively "tunes out" the speaker. He cannot really help it because his mind is multi-directionally oriented. Unless what the speaker is saying is of compelling interest, the listener will have to fight harder and harder to avoid progressively "tuning out."¹¹

Of course these obstacles can be successfully circumvented, but the chaplain as a listener must constantly work at it and train himself to overcome the problems. To use a Biblical phrase, "this kind goeth not out except with much prayer and fasting."

VII. FORMULA FOR EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Since the process of learning to listen effectively is a long and difficult one, and this must not be underemphasized, a workable formula for achieving success should be most welcome to the chaplain. His success as a pastor is tied to his success in learning to listen. A number of proposals have been advanced to enhance this learning process. Taking these proposals into consideration, a viable formula for effective listening can be developed. The following steps are suggested for the chaplain who desires to really listen.

1. Take time to listen. Adopt an attentive attitude and plan to focus the mind upon what is being said and how it is being said.

¹¹ Thompson, Op cit., p. 78.

2. Listen for the main ideas. Try to determine the central theme or elements dominating the speech or conversation. Mentally outline what's being said, with the intent to retain it.

3. Anticipate the next point. This exercise has its danger however since it can prod the listener into interruptions. If this tendency can be controlled, anticipating the next point, whether in logical sequence or not, is a valid step in effective listening.

4. Identify with the ideas expressed. Perhaps this is the most significant point in terms of empathy. It also serves to keep the emotions as well as the mind in tune with the speaker.

5. Review what has been heard. This review serves to fix the material in the mind and facilitate recall.

6. Watch for non-verbal signals. This is essential to a correct interpretation of the import of the words being heard. The non-verbal signals may either confirm or disconfirm the words being spoken.

7. React to the speaker. Do this either verbally or non-verbally as appropriate. This reaction, if verbal, can be through the use of such responses as "Uh huh," "I See," "Hmmm." Non-verbal reactions, though considerably more complex, are indicative of involvement and are a part of effective listening.

8. Make a realistic self-analysis. Apply what is being said to your own situation. The application relates to identification, except that the mind has considerable time left over for the self-analysis.

9. Never probe. Don't be inquisitive.

10. Withhold evaluation or advice, even if asked for it. Most requests for advice are "smokescreens" for the desire for empathy.

11. Keep faith in the speaker's ability to solve a problem. In most instances effective listening does not include offering solutions to problems. This may be a valid response, but once the solution is offered the respondent is no longer listening, he is telling.¹⁵

This formula, while not a panacea, can significantly increase the chaplain's ability to listen. By planning to "hear out" the speaker, the chaplain can achieve concentration at the outset. He can continue that concentration by focusing on the content and identifying with it. As he picks up the various non-verbal signals and reviews what has been said, he is in a position to react to and encourage the speaker.

By withholding evaluation, avoiding probing and keeping faith in the speaker's ability to solve the problem, the chaplain adds the remaining ingredients to the formula. Applying what he hears to himself makes it easier for him to empathize with the speaker.

Thus, the formula will work if taken seriously. The chaplain has the capability and resources to learn to listen since he is seeking counsel on a daily basis. It is merely a question of his motivation.

VIII. RESULTS OF EFFECTIVE LISTENING

There are various benefits to be derived from effective listening. Dr. Nichols lists four.

1. A broadening of knowledge
2. An appreciation of the written word

¹⁵The eleven points listed above are adapted from a series of admonitions and ingredients to good listening suggested by Dr. Ralph Nichols and William D. Thoreson in their books cited above.

3. The development of language facility

b. Therapeutic value. 16

Perhaps the most significant benefit of good listening to the chaplain is that he will rapidly become known as an understanding, empathetic person; one who is to be sought out, confided in and listened to. It seems to be almost axiomatic that those who are the best listeners are the best speakers and the best attended when they speak. Since the chaplain is in the business of communicating good news, it is essential that he listen well so that when his turn comes, his message will be heard.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In summary it can be suggested that the art of listening can be learned by the chaplain, that it is important for the chaplain to learn this valuable skill, that the barriers to effective listening can be overcome, that a relatively simple formula can be applied which works and that counselees and parishoners alike benefit from the chaplain's improved skill in listening.

There is therefore no reason why this skill can not and should not be acquired and taught. Yet it is barely alluded to in contemporary education. Perhaps in the years ahead significant advances will be made in the field of communications which will take cognizance of the value of an effective listener. Certainly the chaplains should be in the forefront of this advance.

²⁰ Nichols, Op cit., pp. 18-32.

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